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LA+ INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE
UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA SCHOOL OF DESIGN

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Library of Congress data available upon request.
World Rights: Available

ISSN: 2376-4171; ISBN: 978-1-941806-59-3

Color Separations and Printing: ORO Group Ltd.
Printed in China

Published and Distributed By ORO editions
Publisher: Gordon Goff
www.oroeditions.com

Proofreading by Evan Morris
Cover and production design by Kate Rodgers
Back cover illustration by Laurie Olin

IN THIS ISSUE

MICK ABBOTT

PRACTICES OF THE WILD: A REWILDING OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE

Mick Abbott is Associate Professor at Lincoln University's School of Landscape Architecture. He is co-editor of a number of books on landscape themes including *Beyond the Scene* [2010], *Making our Place* (2011), and *Wild Heart: The possibility of wilderness in Aotearoa New Zealand* (2011). His recent design research includes projects with Antarctica New Zealand, Air New Zealand, Rio Tinto, Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu, and New Zealand's Department of Conservation. A former outdoor equipment designer, Abbott also completed the first solo traverse of New Zealand's Southern Alps, a journey taking 130 days.

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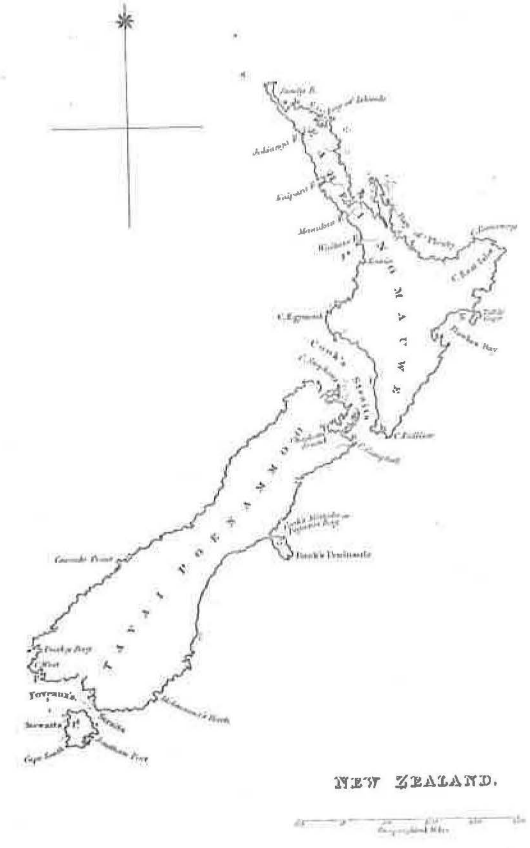

The wild, in the discipline of landscape architecture, has been on the outer. John Beardsley frames it as an elitist touristic locale, only available to the wealthy, that leaves the rest of us inhabiting simulations in the mall or "marginal landscapes, salvaging and recycling to survive."[1] James Corner discusses the "sadly sentimental and escapist" qualities of the scenic overview found in national parks: "Here, landscape is nothing more than an empty sign, a dead event, a deeply aestheticized experience that holds neither portent or promise of a future."[2] For Michael Pollan, it functions as an abstract archetype of untouched nature far removed from landscape's key action points found in the "middle landscapes" of the peri-urban.[3]

What is it about the wild–despite the deep landscape-centric dimensions found in its forms, ecologies, meanings, and cultural attachments–that causes landscape architecture to find scant opportunity and appeal in it? This question is especially relevant, given the scale of the world's wilderness areas and their social and commercial value in terms of cultural identity, recreation and tourism, and what is now commonly referred to as ecosystem services.

One reason relates to wilderness's changing meanings. In his pivotal article, *The Trouble with Wilderness – or Getting Back to the Wrong Nature*, William Cronon traces this dynamic quality: from the desolate, godless place of Christ's abandonment, to its incorporation during the 19th century into the sublime, wherein mountains became cathedrals, and a sense of the spiritual was bonded to nature's wonders. This shift, where people were drawn to places they previously abhorred, was born of a change in mind-set, rather than of any physical change: people simply changed the way they let a landscape influence them. Wilderness was thrilling, but more than that, wilderness was the very stuff of which futures were formed: a frontier that, as it rolled back, transformed forests, grasslands, and ranges into pasture, settlement, and wealth. The wild was potent and full of a promise that was based on what Yi-Fu Tuan calls its "generativity."[4]

However, by the 20th century wilderness had been separated out of the economic and cultural creation of nationhood. Instead, it sedimented around an ideal of remote sanctuaries free of change and development: a recreational retreat for increasingly urban lives. Wilderness, while still strong in the imagination, became materially less available. Hence, despite wilderness being routinely understood as a form of landscape, its ideal of being untouched has meant that for landscape architecture, beyond gateway facilities such as visitor centers and hardening high-use trails, there has simply been little opportunity for design.

Instead, wilderness has become the preserve of environmental activists seeking to stem the flow of mining, energy, transport and tourism developments, and disciplines based in management, planning, tourism, and recreation that have examined these tensions. Intellectually it is environmental history, rather than landscape architecture, which has engaged in a sustained discussion of the relevance of the wilderness idea in contemporary relationships with endemic nature.

Cronon questions the "inherent narcissism" of wilderness, in which "we too easily imagine that what we behold is Nature when in fact we see the reflection of our own unexamined longings and desires."[5] He argues that in wilderness we discover a romanticized other, a flawed idea of nature that locates people as separate from it. As such it casts "any use as *ab*-use, and thereby denies us the middle ground in which responsible use and non-use might attain some kind of balanced, sustainable relationship."[6] Cronon's own belief "is that only by exploring this middle ground will we learn ways of imaging a better world for all of us."[7]

The cause of landscape architecture's antipathy to wilderness is, I think, connected to our preoccupation with landscape as a site – as both a pre-given spatially founded locale, and the principal material we design, shape, and physically produce. Dismissed to the background as ephemeral and occasional is the direct design of behaviors, activities, and experiences that enable a landscape "as-it-is" to better shape us.

While much is made of landscape's instrumentality, the value of such instrumentality for landscape architecture remains as a device to increase a site's expressive potential. As such, Corner's call for "the cultivation of landscape as an innovative cultural agent"[8] has been focused on the design of specific sites. Consequently his prescience remains anticipatory: of speaking "here of a landscape architecture that has yet to appear fully, one that is less preoccupied with ameliorative, stylistic, or pictorial concerns and more actively engaged with imaginative, enabling, and diversifying practices – *practices of the wild*."[9] Gary Snyder's eco-philosophy of "the practice of the wild," which Corner echoes, has at its source a performance of wildness: of the path moving from being a formed trail to being *the way* of entering "the relentless complexity of the world,"[10] in which a place is "spoken" through the manner of our actions.[11]

In contrast, landscape architecture's focus on the site has meant key theoretical developments in the phenomenological generation of landscape are being missed. Anthropologist Tim Ingold articulates a becoming into landscape that is more contingent, temporal, and expansive. Landscape is less a site for form-based expression and more the outcome of our interactions and encounters. As such landscape is open-ended, "never complete: neither built or unbuilt, it is permanently under construction."[12] In this, neither landscapes nor an embodied knowing of them can be pre-configured. Landscape cannot be designed as a precursor to its liveliness. Rather, both the qualities of a landscape and qualities of a person are mutually formed out of "the very activities, of *inhabiting* the land, that both bring places into being and constitute persons as of those places, as local."[13]

This, then, is the critical challenge the wild sets out for landscape architecture. Can we design practices of the wild in which we–people–belong and matter in ways that support endemic systems? And not so much from what we do to a landscape, but rather by what we enable a landscape to do to us.

Contrast, for example, the "being in landscape" revealed through two methods of cooking in the outdoors. In one, a portable gas cooker is taken out of a backpack and placed, along with its adjustable windshield, on the ground. Turning a knob simultaneously releases gas and triggers the ignition; the device is ready for cooking. Such technology might demonstrate excellence in industrial design; however, landscape, in being reduced to a simple backdrop, is made dumb. Landscape loses its particular relevance, and similar experiences become possible whether in wilderness, sitting on your front lawn, or in a store learning to operate the cooker.

The practice of cooking the same food in the same locale, but this time over a portable stove that is fuelled by twigs, creates a landscape that is more instrumental: of walking to a fallen tree to find only half-rotten wood; moving to one side to pick up several hopeful prospects but discarding them as they feel damp [which a simultaneous check of their weight confirms]; deciding anything too near the ground in this part of the forest is too wet; seeing a leafless and likely-to-be-dead branch still attached to a nearby tree; of going to break it but finding it

















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sufficiently supple that it resists snapping; leaving this to find a wonderfully dry, already snapped-off branch hanging in a tree; then continuing in the vicinity to find similar twigs before returning with enough supplies to be able to sort, pack, light, and fan the twig stove.

One technology–the gas cooker–directs landscape to operate as a stage. With the other–the twig cooker–both landscape and person become kinaesthetic, exploratory, tactile, and conversational. In the latter, the unique characteristics and processes of both landscape and person generate a particularity, and with it a richness, of place and identity.

Such a process, as Ingold notes, "has a narrative quality, in the sense that every movement, like every line in a story, grows rhythmically out of the one before and lays the groundwork for the next."[14] The technology of the twig stove choreographs a performance of landscape: as the person is impelled to move about, he or she is enmeshed within the landscape. There are also subtle material differences. In one, remotely extracted and processed fossil fuels from long-buried ancient forests cook the meal. In the other, a localized ethics of acting within living ancient forests, based on intimate decision-making, is foregrounded.

Such an example shows ways in which both people and landscape can be the product of those activities and behaviors that a landscape is enabled to afford. In this, technology is not some transparent or mimetic tool by which the essence of landscape is made available. Rather, as Mike Michaels observes, these technologies are tools that actively interject their own messages to reshape "the affordances of nature by expanding the range of possible actions available to the body."[15] Here, different designs generate different dimensions of landscape.

But importantly the meaning of wilderness is again on the move as it shifts from being a resource-based frontier and solipsistic retreat to being appreciated as an enduring reserve of endemic biodiversity: both interconnected and distributed, as well as microscopic and expansive in scales. The wild is increasingly ecological, and imbued with values associated with biodiversity and resilience – a hotspot where the restoration of threated ecosystems is in contest with invasive pests and predators. In this can be found a significant challenge: how to create innovative behaviors and technologies that foster ecological restoration where people's activities benefit outcomes, rather than adversely impact them.

Here in Aotearoa, New Zealand, fully one-third of the country is public conservation land – tracts of endemic ecosystems larger in size than Denmark and Switzerland together. Examining the social and landscape-centric potential of this "new wild" is a core question for Lincoln University's Landscope DesignLab. What behaviors create meaningful change in landscapes, and what technologies might then be designed to activate this landscape?

Tim Reed's "Plant-it" mobile app crowd-sources the replanting of forest native species on previously cleared conservation lands. Smartphone applications use GPS capabilities to direct walkers to nearby sites so they can add the mix of plants they are carrying to those previously planted and recorded. This system tunes instructions according to different mobilities, plant species, and quantities people have with them. Here a "practice of the wild" is created from the technology of an algorithm, wrapped up in a mobile app, rather than a preconfigured site-based design. Landscape is performed rather than purveyed.

Also, on the South Island's West Coast, Landscope DesignLab has been experimenting with the role of national parks in the 21st century: intentionally redesigning them from a place made special because of the relative absence of people, to one whose ecological integrity is the direct result of people's actions to volunteer time and resources. At the proposed Punakaiki Living Lab, a mining site is rehabilitated through asking locals and travellers alike to not just look, but also act. Opportunities exist to contribute an hour, day, or week to the work of the nursery [including collecting local seeds, raising seedlings, and potting them out] and to active programs of planting, pest eradication, and citizen science: the goal being to return this rehabilitated site to the adjoining 75,000-acre Paparoa National Park.

The construction of the facility is similarly crowd-sourced by volunteers collecting low-carbon materials including beach gravel, river stones and sands, and fallen totārā timber with which to create gabion baskets, paths, boardwalks, and viewing platforms. It is a project based on an interwoven performance of making, planting, and restoration, that is a response to the materiality and what Ingold calls the "condensed stories" of this landscape.[16]

Such work suggests a shift in the nature of what landscape architecture produces. Rather than the design of a site occurring as a precursor to the practices the interventions afford, the role of the landscape architect expands to include the design of practices from which both landscape and qualities of belonging might be co-produced. Spatial plans become schematic and prospective - a diagrammatic imagination of people's actions. It also suggests–given practices of landscape are also generated by products and devices–an expanded field of operation for landscape architecture, in which a product's functions are designed to draw out behaviors that enable people to "speak" a landscape.

A more proactive and intentional practice of landscape is possible. Yet the question as to what behaviors provide the most benefit to both landscape and people, and then the design of the prompts that could enable such a dialogue, remains very much our "landscopic" frontier. For landscape architecture there is significant scope to expand its generative and creative relationship with landscape beyond the understanding of a landscape's system and the shaping of specific sites. Given landscape architecture's intimate knowledge of the value of landscape, and the ways it enables people and ecology to interact, there are opportunities to design behaviors, tools, technologies, devices, and strategies where endemic biodiversity and ecological resilience are nurtured. This "new wild" demands a design of landscape-centric behaviors in which landscape is produced rather than shaped. Investigating this can also open landscape architecture to the potential of designing innovative actions in other contexts: to foster activities, for example, founded in practices of carbon reduction, waste elimination, water use, mobility, and food production.

And as such, and to paraphrase Thoreau,[17] *a practice of the wild* might yet afford the preservation of a world within which we remain a valued part.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Professor Jacky Bowring, co-director of Landscope DesignLab, for her active involvement and advice in this research, and to Professors Robert Thayer, Gini Lee, and Simon Swaffield for their very helpful reviews of an earlier, significantly longer, version of this research. Thanks also to New Zealand's Department of Conservation, Professor Nick Dickinson, and the Punakaiki Coastal Restoration Partnership for supporting this research.

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[3] Michael Pollan, "On Design: Beyond wilderness and lawn," *Harvard Design Magazine* 4 [1998]: 70.

[4] Yi-Fu Tuan, "Foreword," in K. Olwig [ed.], *Landscape, Nature, and the Body Politic: From Britain's renaissance to America's new world* [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002], xix.

[5] William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in W. Cronon [ed.], *Uncommon Ground* [New York: WW Norton & Company, 1995], 69–70.

[6] Ibid., 85.

[7] Ibid.

[8] James Corner, "Recovering Landscape as a Critical Cultural Practice," in J. Corner [ed.], *Recovering Landscape*, 4.

[9] James Corner, "Ecology and Landscape as Agents of Creativity," in G.F. Thompson & F.R. Steiner [eds], *Ecological Design and Planning* [New York: Wiley, 1997], 105 [Corner's emphasis].

[10] Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild: Essays* [San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990], 145.

[11] Ibid., 115.

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[13] Tim Ingold & Terhi Kurttila, "Perceiving the Environment in Finnish Lapland," *Body and Society* 6 No. 3–4 [2000]: 185.

[14] Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment*, 347.

[15] Mike Michael, "These Boots are Made for Walking: Mundane Technology, the Body and Human-Environment Relations," *Body and Society* 6 No. 3–4 [2000]: 114.

[16] Tim Ingold, "Materials against materiality," *Archaeological Dialogues* 14 No. 1 [2007]: 14.

[17] Henry David Thoreau's often-quoted "in Wildness is the preservation of the world" is from his 1862 essay, "Walking."